MIT AND CALTECH JOIN FORCES TO LAUNCH ELECTION TECHNOLOGY INITIATIVE

HON. WILLIAM D. DELAHUNT

OF MASSACHUSETTS

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Friday, December 15, 2000

Mr. DELAHUNT. Mr. Speaker, as the dust settles over the presidential election of 2000, I hope we will treat our recent experience as an opportunity to adopt long overdue reforms in the way we run our Federal elections. I hope we will enlist our best minds in the effort to develop better systems and procedures that will restore public confidence in the accuracy and integrity of the electoral process.

In this regard, I want to call to the attention of my colleagues an initiative launched just yesterday by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Caltech, to develop a new voting machine that will be easy to use, reliable, secure and affordable.

With an initial grant from the Carnegie Corporation, the venture will bring together a team of leading experts in technology, design, and political science to develop technological solutions to the problems that have occurred not only in Florida but throughout the country.

This is a very promising development, Mr. Speaker, and I hope we will do all we can to foster such private sector initiatives. But we must also be sure that State and local election officials have the wherewithal to take advantage of new technologies. That is why when the 107th Congress convenes in January, I will join with Congressman Graham and a number of our colleagues in introducing bipartisan legislation to ensure the accuracy, integrity, and efficiency of future Federal elections.

The ''Federal Election Standards Act'' would establish a National Advisory Commission on Federal Election Standards to study the accuracy, integrity, and efficiency of Federal election procedures and develop standards of best practice for the conduct of Federal elections. The commission would have one year to complete its work.

Once the commission has issued its report, the bill would authorize Federal grants and technical assistance to States that wish to adopt measures for reform of their election procedures in a manner consistent with the standards.

The Act would not mandate changes in State practices, nor would it federalize election procedures. Rather, it would encourage State election officials to upgrade and modernize their election systems by establishing benchmarks for the conduct of Federal elections and providing the States with the resources needed to meet them.

Mr. Speaker, I hope that the next congress will take prompt action on this legislation, so that the most advanced nation on earth will have an electoral system that is up to the task.

[MIT News Office]

MIT, CALTECH JOIN FORCES TO DEVELOP RELIABLE, UNIFORM US VOTING MACHINE

(By Sarah H. Wright)

CAMBRIDGE, MA, DEC. 14.—The presidents of MIT and Caltech have announced a collaborative project to develop an easy-to-use, reliable, affordable and secure United States voting machine that will prevent a recurrence of the problems that threatened the 2000 presidential election. The announcement was made in a joint video news conferences at MIT and Caltech on Thursday. ''It is embarrassing to America when technology fails and puts democracy to such a test as it did this month,'' said Caltech President David Baltimore, who opened the hour-long live teleconference in Pasadena, California. ''Academic institutions have a responsibility to help repair the voting process so that we don't see anything like this again. This project is intended to protect the system from the problems we've seen in the last election,'' Dr. Baltimore said.

MIT President Charles M. Vest, speaking from Cambridge, echoed Dr. Baltimore's concern for the security and credibility of the voting process. ''We must find a solution. Each of us must be confident that his or her vote has been reliably recorded and counted. A country that has put a man on the moon and an ATM machine on every corner has no excuse,'' said Dr. Vest. ''America needs a uniform balloting procedure. This has become painfully obvious in the current national election, but the issue is deeper and broader than one series of events,'' said Vest and Baltimore in a Dec. 12 letter to President Vartan Gregorian of Carnegie Corporation of New York.

Gregorian said, ''I want to congratulate the two presidents of our nation's most distinguished universities for their leadership in this welcome and timely initiative on behalf of our election system. Voting is the fundamental safeguard of our democracy and we have the technological power to ensure that every person's vote does count. MIT and Caltech have assembled a team of America's top technology and political science scholars to deal with an issue no voter wants ignored. This research is certain to ensure that America's voting process is strengthened-'' Gregorian said he will recommend the Carnegie Corporation board fund the $250,000 initial phase of the research.

The grant will used by a team of two professors from each university who are experts in technology, design and political science. The four members of the team are Massachusetts Institute of Technology Professors Stephen Ansolabehere of political science and Nicholas Negroponte, chairman of the MIT Media Lab; and Caltech Professors Thomas Palfrey of political science and economics and Jehoshua Bruck of computation and neural systems and electrical engineering.

LESSEN CONFUSION

Professor Ansolabehere, speaking at the teleconference, said, ''We are going to consider voting technologies from the paper ballots of the nineteenth century to the latest. First, we'll look, literally, at what people do in the voting booth. There, our goal is to lower voter confusion. ''Second, we'll look at how votes are counted, comparing the precinct level to a central counting agency. We will look at the strengths and weaknesses of voting technologies, find the greatest weakness and work from there. Our goal is to find the most reliable among existing technologies.'' The first phase of the joint project—surveying existing technologies and setting up criteria—would be complete in about six months, Professor Ansolabehere added.

Professor Palfrey of Caltech noted there were ''issues that didn't hit the press in Florida but that are critical, including comparing the cost of existing technologies to the cost of standardization and modernization, which could run into several billions of dollars. ''But compare that one-time cost to the $300 billion annual defense budget. It's a small price to pay for modernizing democracy,'' he said. Professor Palfrey also noted other issues for the MIT-Caltech team to explore, such as the impact of the current system of election administration, which is ''highly decentralized and fragmented,'' and the role of absentee voting, with its implied concerns of security, liability, privacy, maintenance and software development.

FEEDBACK

Professor Negroponte, chairman of the MIT Media Lab, spoke to his bi-coastal colleagues and the media about the actual interface between people and any voting machine. ''Whatever is invented will include some interface with machines, whether we vote by computer, paper or in a voting booth. The Media Lab intends to make that interface as easy as possible,'' he said.

Professor Negroponte outlined the goals of the joint project from the perspective of design and feedback by comparing the act of voting with the act of pushing a button to summon an elevator. ''Right now, there's no feedback at all in voting. You push the button. Nothing happens. It's like when you push the elevator button and nothing happens: you don't know if the elevator is broken or the light is broken. It would be good to have some degree of feedback in voting. For example, you might get some feedback saying, 'you voted for x,'''he noted.

ATM THE MODEL

The MIT-Caltech faculty team took a generally lighthearted view of the alleged challenges to the public of mastering new voting technology, despite months of. media attention to voter confusion over the various forms of ballots and punch-card machines that didn't punch. ''Beware of the assumption that newer technology is more complicated. The trend is the opposite,'' said Dr. Vest. ''Most people have been able to figure out ATMS. That's our model,'' remarked Dr. Baltimore.

Vest and Baltimore said the new technology ''should minimize the possibility of confusion about how to vote, and offer clear verification of what vote is to be recorded. It should decrease to near zero the probability of miscounting votes... The voting technology should be tamper-resistant and should minimize the prospect of manipulation and fraud.'' The two university presidents proposed that their institutions give the project high priority for two major reasons:

''First, the technologies in wide use today are unacceptably unreliable. This manifests itself in at least three forms: undercounts (failure to correctly record a choice of candidate), overcounts (voting for two candidates), and missed ballots (machine failure or feeding error). Punch cards and optically scanned ballots are two of the most widely used technologies, and both suffer unacceptably high error rates in all three categories. For example, in the recent Florida election, optical scanning technology had an undercount rate of approximately 3 out of 1,000, and the punch card undercount rate was approximately 15 out of 1,000. Including the other two sources of errors, the overall ballot failure rate with machine counting was about three times this.

''Second, some of the most common types of machinery date from the late nineteenth century and have become obsolete. Most notably, many models of lever machines are no longer manufactured, and although spare parts are difficult to obtain, they are still widely used (accounting for roughly 15 percent of all ballots cast).

REPLACING LEVER MACHINES

''States and municipalities using lever machines will have to replace them in the near future, and the two most common alternatives are punch cards and optical scanning devices. Ironically, many localities in Massachusetts have recently opted for lever machines over punch card ballots because of

problems with punch cards registering preferences.''

Asked to comment on the project as scientists, both university presidents noted the convergence of history and technology as being especially promising for the development of a new voting machine. ''This is a project we could have tackled any time, but the truly bizarre circumstances of the recent presidential election put it on the front burner. We are also at a technological point where a solution is highly likely,'' said Dr. Vest. ''There are times when events overtake us. This is a good time and a necessary time to be doing this,'' said Dr. Baltimore.

The Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the California Institute of Technology have a relationship dating back to 1920 when MIT scientists' helped shape the chemistry and physics departments of the new California Institute of Technology. Dr. Baltimore, a 1975 Nobel laureate, served on the MIT faculty from 1968-90 and 1994-1997, when he was appointed president of Caltech.

THE INTRODUCTION OF THE COMMISSION ON ELECTIONS PROCEDURES ACT

HON. RUSH D. HOLT

OF NEW JERSEY

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Friday, December 15, 2000

Mr. HOLT. Mr. Speaker, even at the dawn of the twenty-first century, there are many states and localities that conduct their elections in ways that are outdated, slow, unreliable, inaccurate, and inaccessible to many.

One need not look further than the turmoil surrounding the 2000 Presidential election to see the disparities of our electoral process. For instance, while some counties in Florida have modern voting machines that leave little room for error, others use dated punch-card ballots, that can lead to the now-famous hanging and dimpled chads.

That is why I rise to introduce the ''Commission on Elections Procedures Act,'' which establishes a bipartisan commission to study the Federal, State, and local electoral process and to make recommendations on the implementation of standardized voting procedures.

The long national nightmare of the 2000 Presidential vote counting has taught us, Republicans and Democrats alike, that we need to improve the instruments of voting and the means of electing our office holders. Even the Supreme Court Justices spoke of the need for uniform voting procedures.

Let me be clear: unlike some legislation that has been introduced in this regard, this is not a federal mandate of election standards. This bill simply calls for a study to determine if standardization is necessary and to recommend what changes can be made to improve our electoral process.

I understand that a rural state like North Dakota has voting problems that are different than those faced by a more urban state like New Jersey. Urban and rural areas have unique difficulties with voting. My legislation recognizes these differences and will work to find a common solution. While all areas could face problems of the cost of transition to a new system, I am confident that money can be found to assist the states in this area.

By establishing a commission to study the issue and to review the unique circumstances of each state, we have a chance to find a solution that will work for everyone.

I urge my colleagues to join me in supporting this important bill.

RECOGNIZING INTERNATIONAL DAY OF THE VOLUNTEER

HON. NANCY PELOSI

OF CALIFORNIA

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Friday, December 15, 2000

Ms. PELOSI. Mr. Speaker, on December 5th, I spoke to volunteers and staff at the Peace Corps headquarters here in Washington, D.C. to mark the International Day of the Volunteer. In 1985, the United Nations General Assembly declared December 5th as ''International Volunteer Day'' to honor the accomplishments of volunteers and volunteer organizations. It is a day to recognize volunteers, promote the concept of volunteerism, and provide an opportunity for volunteer organizations to come together for joint planning, service, and other activities.

Today I'd like to salute the 161,000 Americans who have served as volunteers in the Peace Corps since 1961. For 40 years, Peace Corps Volunteers have worked in over 130 countries to answer President John F. Kennedy's call to service: ''Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country, and to the citizens of the world, ask not what America can do for you, but what we can do working together for the freedom of mankind.'' Volunteers have answered his call and helped pave the way for progress for countless individuals who want to build a better life for themselves, their children, and their communities.

This year, Peace Corps Volunteers, Trainees, and Peace Corps staff members will be participating in activities with other local and international volunteer organizations in their countries to mark this day, which takes on special significance this year as the launch for the United Nations International Year of Volunteers 2001—a world-wide celebration to recognize, support, and promote volunteering. In Lesotho, a Peace Corps volunteer will speak at a ceremony attended by members of the government. In Tanzania, there will be a special swearing-in ceremony of new volunteers. In Moldova, volunteers will raise funds for children's charities. In Washington, Peace Corps staff from headquarters will volunteer at Food and Friends to help deliver meals and groceries to families of people living with HIV/AIDS.

In honor of the International Year of Volunteers 2001, other international volunteer sending organizations such as Australian Volunteers International, Canada World Youth, United Nations Volunteers, and the United Kingdom's Voluntary Services Overseas are joining with the Peace Corps to make a commitment to expand their HIV/AIDS education efforts throughout the world.

Throughout the world, and particularly Africa, HIV/AIDS is having a devastating effect on people of all ages by threatening the future of development and well being of their communities. This year the Peace Corps launched a special initiative to retrain all 2,400 volunteers serving in Africa to become HIV/AIDS prevention educators. In a sign of solidarity and support, the leaders of Australian Volunteers International, Canada World Youth, United Nations Volunteers and the United Kingdom's Voluntary Services Overseas have joined with the Peace Corps in committing the best and most effective strategies to meet the enormous challenge of halting the spread of HIV/AIDS.

Today, I commend the Peace Corps and other volunteer organizations for being committed to spreading the concept of volunteerism. In honor of International Volunteer Day and the International Year of Volunteers 2001, it is my privilege to salute the important work of the Peace Corps and volunteers throughout the world.

FUNDRAISING SOLICITATIONS BY NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS

HON. ROBERT L. EHRLICH, JR.

OF MARYLAND

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Friday, December 15, 2000

Mr. EHRLICH. Mr. Speaker, I wish today to announce the introduction of legislation that will help clarify the law regarding fund-raising solicitations by nonprofit organizations. I also want to recognize the efforts of my colleagues, House Government Reform Chairman DAN BURTON and House Postal Service Subcommittee Chairman JOHN MCHUGH, for their leadership on postal service issues.

Mr. Speaker, as you may know, Congress recognized the many important and worthwhile activities of nonprofits by establishing a nonprofit mail rate for charities, churches, educational, advocacy, and other nonprofit organizations. These are enumerated in the Postal Reorganization Act of 1970. One of Congress' objectives was to make it more affordable for nonprofits to solicit donations to fund their activities.

For a mail piece to be eligible for the lower nonprofit rate, Congress prescribed two requirements: first, the organization or mailer must be qualified to mail at the nonprofit rate; and second, the qualified organization must own the mail piece.

Over the last several years, the United States Postal Service, which has made great strides under Postmasters Runyon and Henderson, has increasingly applied the statutory standard of ''ownership'' in a way that may have a chilling effect on the use of nonprofit mail rates to solicit donations for charity, education, and advocacy.

The purpose of the bill I am introducing today is to clarify ambiguities existing in both law and Postal Service regulations with respect to fundraising. The bill clarifies the law so the Postal Service should not read the statutory ''ownership'' test so literally as to disqualify solicitation mail sent by otherwise eligible nonprofit organizations that negotiate a risk-sharing agreement with respect to their solicitation mail.

In my view, it is imperative that otherwise qualified nonprofit organizations be able to solicit donations at the lowest possible cost. When nonprofits conduct activities that further the purposes enumerated in the statute, for example to provide ''safety net'' social services, it eases the burden on government and taxpayers.

During a time in which Congress is attempting to allow taxpayers to keep more of their